

## THE BARAMA RIVER CARIBS

791 rituals are carried on inside a small hut, or consultation room, called the toakai, and in them he uses tobacco in the form of smoke and in the form of an infusion, alcoholic drinks, and certain herbs.

Following is an account, given me by David, the piaiyen of Sawari, of the origin of piai and of how David himself learned the technique.

773 Komanakoto was the first piaiyen. One day he was at the river  
791 side and heard a mysterious singing. At first unable to decide the origin of it, he finally decided that it came from under the water, so he dived down into the river. At the bottom he found a number of beautiful spirit women singing magical songs. They welcomed him and taught him the songs. After three days he came up and told the people of his settlement of the strange thing which had happened to him. They were naturally somewhat incredulous, so he went to the river again and descended to the bottom for three days. At the end of that time he reappeared, bringing with him not only the songs and the mysteries of the piai, but also the tangible equipment: tobacco, maraka with handle and stones, and arrow stick (from which handles are made). Thereafter he taught other men the piai, and that is how piai first came to the Caribs.

Three other young men learned from David's teacher at the same time as he did. A small house was built, with walls made of palm leaves so tightly plaited that the interior was entirely dark. On the first day of the initiation all the candidates assembled in the house with their hammocks. The teacher took a large amount of green tobacco and pounded it up so that it made quite a little heap in the center of the house. Taking some of this, he put it in a large earthenware bowl and filled the bowl with water. After letting it "set" for a time, he strained off the tobacco water and threw away the leaves. Then each of the candidates was given a large calabash of tobacco water to drink and a cigarette to smoke. Having already supplied themselves with gourds, and arrow sticks from which to make the handles of the rattles, they were now shown by the teacher how to make the maraka. As soon as the tobacco juice began to take effect and their heads "were going round," the teacher gave them each two small pieces of black stone to put inside the maraka. These stones contained the spirit of Piyumari, the land spirit, and that of his wife.

791 After imbibing the tobacco juice David lay down in a swoon.  
787

## OF BRITISH GUIANA

171

He went to a place he had never seen before (in hallucination), a place where beautiful women sang to him songs which he had never heard before. This was the place of the spirits, but so queer it was that while there, one had merely to turn his head to see behind him the initiation room and all the familiar faces he had just left. The women approached him, took away the cigarette he was smoking and gave him one of their own making, and gave him their tobacco juice to drink. And all the while they were singing songs. After a time he felt the teacher blowing tobacco smoke on the crown of his head, and he and all the other neophytes returned to themselves. They were sick and vomited, but each one, if he had luck, had brought back from the spirit world a song taught him by one of the spirits in that land of dreams. And each knew that when he sang that song in the future the spirit which had given it would come to him and aid him.

Once again they smoked and drank tobacco water. Then the teacher formed them in a line, and they danced in a circle to the left around the fire, which was in the center of the floor. They kept time by rattling their marakas in their right hands, and, because they were weak, supported themselves with arrow sticks in their left hands as they danced. And as they danced those beat drums who could, and others played violins, and each sang the songs which had been taught him by the spirits. During all this the teacher from time to time squeezed pepper water in their eyes. Then they drank some more tobacco water, and after doing so fell down in a swoon, growling like tigers. And David saw a huge tiger come to him and smell. David smelled the tiger and knew that this was his own particular tiger spirit who would come to him in the future when he drank tobacco water. David felt himself turn into a tiger, and he prowled about the floor on all fours, growling. After a time, however, he felt the teacher blowing tobacco smoke on his head. Waking up, he was given more tobacco juice to drink. Everyone vomited and then they lay down in their hammocks to sleep a short while.

Early in the morning the teacher wakened them. The other people of the settlement had collected a quantity of firewood and had built a large bonfire in the middle of a trail which they had cleared in the thick bush, near the place where the houses stood. The neophytes were told that they must pass through this fire.

## THE BARAMA RIVER CARIBS

791 First the teacher started acting like a tiger, growling and going  
• 787 on all fours, with his fingers clenched up under the palms of his  
hands in the way a tiger holds his claws. In this manner he passed  
through the fire and was followed by all the neophytes, who  
passed through the fire and turned about and returned through  
it. The flames licked them, and some came out with their skins  
blazing.

791 After this ordeal they returned to the initiation hut where they  
imbibed more tobacco water. Then the teacher said they must  
go to the creek and bathe. So in a single file, supporting them-  
selves with their arrow sticks, they went to the bathing place.  
While they bathed, the women of the settlement threw mud on  
them and made fun of them. They were told to throw mud at the  
women, but they were too weak to do this effectively. They were  
instructed to try to catch anything they could find in the water,  
such as fish or worms. Any neophyte who succeeded in this would  
have additional power over the spirits of the water. Everyone  
then returned to the settlement, where drink was ready and prepa-  
rations had been made for a spree. The neophytes, however,  
returned to their hut, where the teacher gave each of them a large  
calabash of cassiri in which big black ants (yoku) had been put.  
After drinking this, they had a calabash of sweet cassiri "to cool  
them down." The rest of the people were making sport by this  
time, in which the neophytes were free to join, although they  
were so weak that they could not do so very energetically. The  
initiation was now complete.

For three months following the initiation they were subject to  
the following restrictions: no sleeping with women; no eating of  
fish or meat; they were warned against allowing smoke or flames  
to touch them; they were warned against getting into the steam  
which comes off a cooking pot. All these things were believed to  
offend the spirits which had come to live with the new piaiyen.

If, during this time, a man needed meat, it had to be taken in  
the following manner: it was cut up in small pieces and roasted  
over the fire on the end of a stick, so that the piaiyen did not get  
into the smoke. The meat was then wrapped in a tobacco leaf  
and swallowed as a pill. If the pill stuck in the throat during the  
act of swallowing, it was apparent to the piaiyen that the spirit  
did not want it. The procedure could, however, be repeated until

## THE BARAMA RIVER CARIBS

791 tion is given. The teacher makes a long cigarette of tobacco wrapped  
789 in kakarelli bark and tosses it to the novice. If the latter is able  
to catch the cigarette between the second and third fingers (where  
the "muzzle" of the shooting tube is located), it is a sign that as  
time goes on he will be able to get into communication with any  
spirit at all. Also in this connection, the teacher will frequently  
send a spirit stone to the novice during the night. The novice  
must see it coming and catch it.

796 To make a good cassava crop, the piaiyen of the settlement calls  
787 the spirit of the field, Piuku. First a toakai, or consulting room, is  
constructed of manicol palm (Plate 25, a). A goblet of cassiri,  
which must be made by a preadolescent girl, is given to the priest,  
and he enters the toakai while the population of the settlement  
gathers outside. Inside the hut, the piaiyen places the goblet in  
the middle of the floor and then drinks an infusion of green tobacco  
leaves in water, a potion which is imbibed by the piaiyen at the  
start of most of his religious and healing rituals. The tobacco  
water causes the practitioner to "speak with the spirits," that is,  
to have visions or hallucinations. The medicine man, squatting  
on the side of the hut opposite the door, then sings a chant to the  
Piuku, asking him to come and partake of the offering provided  
by the people. In this ceremony the piaiyen uses no rattle, because  
Piuku is not included among those spirits which are represented  
by spirit stones. Neither is tobacco smoke used. When the spirit  
arrives in the hut his presence is made known to the people out-  
side by a low humming noise, the voice of the spirit. Thereupon  
all the people outside the hut speak to him individually (without  
formula), asking him for a good crop of cassava and imploring  
him to drink of the cassiri. The Piuku answers with his charac-  
teristic low humming noise, which all can hear but only the piaiyen  
can understand. Then there is the sound of drinking, and shortly  
afterwards the piaiyen emerges from the hut holding the goblet  
in his hand for the inspection of the populace. The contents of the  
goblet are clear like water and are icy cold, indicating that Piuku  
has drunk the essence of the brew. Then the piaiyen goes back  
into the hut and sings a song, thanking the spirit and telling him  
now to go back to the field, from which he has come for the occa-  
sion. After this the piaiyen emerges from the hut a second time  
and informs the people as to whether the spirit's answer to their

## OF BRITISH GUIANA

175

pleas was favorable or unfavorable, in other words, whether there will be a good or a poor crop that year. It is said that the prognostications of the piaiyen are remarkably accurate. Following this ceremony a drinking spree takes place. 796 787 ●

The precise songs which are sung in this and other ceremonies I was unable to obtain because it was impossible to find a piaiyen who spoke English of any description. Using laymen as interpreters, I was blocked because of the secrecy which guards the proprietary interest which a piaiyen has in his incantations. It was claimed by all piaiyen, however, that the songs which each practitioner uses are peculiar to him alone. As he becomes established he invents songs and incantations of his own, or has them revealed to him by the spirits while he is in a trance induced by tobacco. By the process of trial and error, those songs which are efficacious in calling the spirits are retained in the individual piaiyen's repertoire. Medicine men say that when they wish to learn more about the spirits, to establish contact with spirits which are strangers to them, they retire to their consultation rooms or palmleaf huts, drink the usual infusion of tobacco water, smoke a cigarette, and soon the spirits may come and talk to them. During the hallucination they will discover themselves singing songs which they must remember to use on subsequent occasions when they wish to consult the spirits in question. 533 787 791

Contrary to the usages of medicine men in certain other Guiana tribes,<sup>1</sup> the piaiyen of the Barama do not use dolls or elaborately carved benches in the practice of their art.<sup>2</sup> Each piaiyen does use a bench, which is reserved for ceremonial purposes in the exercise of his duties, but these benches, which I have seen in use by the piaiyen at religious observances, belong to the general type used by laymen as pieces of house furniture. If my information is correct, the rattle, with its enclosed spirit stones, tobacco, herbs, and a bench are the sole ceremonial accessories used by medicine men. 778 791

In addition to the cassava ceremony, the piaiyen conducts a ceremony, the details of which I was unable to learn, at times when 796 796

<sup>1</sup> Roth, 1915, *Animism and Folk Lore*, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> After a month of close relationship with David, the medicine man of Sawari, I was unable to break down his "story" to this effect. Finally remaining unconvinced, I resorted to the slightly unethical expedient of opening, in his absence, the basket where he stored his paraphernalia. Here was found his rattle with enclosed stones, tobacco, a number of dried leaves (presumably herbs used in curing), but no manikin or doll.

## OF BRITISH GUIANA

187

the monster's tongues. On the theory of similarity and contact, the dog's nose absorbs the ability to hunt all things down. 789  
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Puppies are frequently protected from illness by a string of cotton tied around the right leg just above the point of the astragalus. The progress through the body of spirits which may have entered the animal through its feet is cut off by the string around the leg. 789  
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The shells of the large river snail, which bear a general resemblance to the globular gourd, are tied to gourd bushes as a means of insuring a good crop.

The snake is believed to live forever, because in changing its skin it becomes young again each year. The same is said to be true of the bush crab, which doffs its shell each year.

The larynx bones of the "howling baboon" (*Myctes*) are charred, pulverized, mixed with water, and drunk as an infusion as a cure for coughs and throat trouble.

**Dreams.** If a man dreams of a dead person, he believes that he is actually seeing the ghost of the dead walking by at that moment. 828  
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If a person dreams of a faraway place, he believes that his spirit is visiting that place while he sleeps. "If I dream of Waini Saw Mill (a hundred miles away), it means that my spirit is out for a walk."

When a living person is seen in a dream, the Caribs have difficulty in explaining why the person in question did not dream that his spirit was at the point mentioned by the first dreamer. One informant was perplexed by the following: "Two times I dreamed the same dream. My brother and I were paddling a korial in the Wori-wori rapids (on the Barama) each time. But my brother did not dream that at all."

It is believed that when a man dreams of intercourse with a specific woman, the representation of her which he sees is merely the disguise assumed by a malevolent snake spirit, and that it is not the actual spirit of the woman in question. Certain female spirits take delight in assuming the forms of living women and appearing to men in dreams. An erotic dream of this sort is highly undesirable, because it is believed that a man will become seriously ill after such a dream unless he immediately confesses it to the other members of the settlement. The spirit which he sees in a dream of this sort will make the dreamer ill and try to kill him so

828 that she can have him for herself, but will be frightened away if

787 the man makes a clean breast of the visionary intrigue. Snake-women spirits most commonly appear to men in dreams. If a man continues to dream in this way, the spirit woman will appear to him in the bush and will try to kill him. Prolonged dreaming of this sort can only be cured by a piayen. The Caribs, in common

[839] with most men, find that erotic dreams accompanying seminal emission practically disappear if a man is having regular intercourse with a woman, and explain this phenomenon on the theory that spirit women are too intelligent to attempt to seduce a man who is well satisfied with his earthly sexual life.

The case is related of a certain man who continued to dream in this way without saying anything about it. Finally the spirit with which he was consorting in his dreams became pregnant and gave birth to a child. Other people heard the baby crying in the bush. Going into the forest they were surprised to see the spirit woman appear to them holding a baby in her arms. The man said nothing, but became violently ill and only when he was dying did he tell the story of his experience and express the belief that the spirit was carrying him away.

[825] These dream women seem to be connected with snakes and with only a particular kind of snake, called timering akoyu, which, marked with red, white, blue, and green coloring, is considered very beautiful.

The figures of one's enemies are wont to appear in nightmares. Even if the enemies are not recognizable, the grotesque and hideous forms seen in nightmares are regarded as disguises of the spirits of persons who are plotting harm to the dreamer. A man who is bothered by repeated nightmares consults a sorcerer to discover what is afoot and thus nip any plots in the bud.

196 **Sex in Inanimate Objects.** Certain objects of material culture are thought of as having sex, according to their form. It cannot be said on the basis of my information that the conception embraces more than a rudimentary idea of animistic identification, nor does it seem that the sex of a given object is connected with the spirit of that object. On the whole, the sexual differentiation of certain objects seems to refer to purely qualitative differences. The form which is considered best is in each case identified with the male sex.

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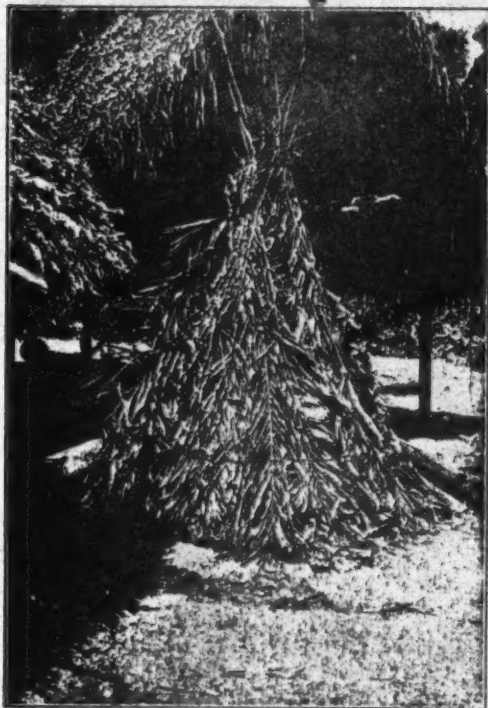
VOL. XIV, No. 2, PLATE 25



6, David, the *plaiyen* of *Sawari* with his rattle containing the spirit-stones.

787  
346

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5, The consulting room (*toakal*), made of *manicool* leaves inside which the *plaiyen* consults his spirits upon those occasions when this is necessary.

[End plate 25]